Rechecking the Bullets

"Was there a conspiracy? Was the CIA involved? Was there a person other than Sirhan involved? Those are the questions that need answering."

The man who raised those problems last week about the 1968 assassination of Robert F. Kennedy was not some paranoid conspiracy hunter but Kenneth Hahn, a member of the Los Angeles County board of supervisors. The occasion for his questions was the board's unanimous vote to have the county counsel join in a new assessment of the evidence in Kennedy's murder.

There were eight witnesses who saw Sirhan Bishara Sirhan shoot the New York Senator, and there was little dispute at the time over his sentence to life imprisonment. Since then, however, a number of ballistics experts have found discrepancies between a bullet that struck Kennedy in the neck and the bullet that hit Bystander William Weisel in the stomach. Another bullet fired in the attack wounded Paul Schrade, a former United Autoworkers official and Kennedy aide. Although he does not support any conspiracy theory, Schrade has tried for more than a year to get the case reopened to remove all doubts that Sirhan was the only gunman.

New Support. Last month Schrade gained the support of the prestigious American Academy of Forensic Sciences. After examining microscopic photographs taken five years ago by Ballistics Expert William Harper, three academy members reported that there appeared to be significant differences in the markings of two of the bullets fired that day. The academy urged that the case be reopened. In fact, District Attorney Joseph P. Busch had been considering ways to reopen the investigation, but Busch died on June 27. His successor, Acting District Attorney John Howard, had prosecuted Sirhan and had no doubt that he had acted alone. Nonetheless, the supervisors ignored Howard's opposition and urged that the evidence be restudied. Explained Chairman James Hayes: "This whole subject has been kicked around for several years now. If it could be openly reassessed in some proper form, it would be in the best interest of the public."

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Robert Wenke last week agreed to a refiring of the Sirhan gun by ballistics experts. He directed that lawyers decide by Sept. 11 which ballistics expert should handle the matter and what procedures should be followed. Sirhan's attorney, Godfrey Isaac, was delighted by Wenke's order ("I know that Sirhan's in his cell jumping up and down for joy"), but most experts who have followed the case do not expect the re-examination to change the original verdict. They believe that it will simply confirm Sirhan as the sole assassin.